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AUTHOR Delgadillo, Fernando
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ABSTRACT

A popular concept in education indicates that effective instruction requires the teacher to know the child. A study was conducted at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in order to determine where this knowledge comes from. A group of 15 teachers enrolled in the graduate school listed their students and indicated which students they knew something about or knew nothing about. They then predicted which students would be the top three in the class and which would be the bottom three. At the end of the semester a second exercise was completed in which they indicated the sources of knowledge about each student. Findings suggest that when the teacher does know more about the child, such knowledge does not come directly from the child but rather from parent conferences, student records, other teachers, or school specialists. Furthermore, these teachers knew almost nothing about one-third of the 372 students involved in the study. It can be recommended that teachers first learn more about their students from the students themselves and supplement this knowledge by interacting with the students' home life. The question which serves as the title of this article is still largely unanswered. Tables depicting four elements of teacher/student knowledge are included. (LL)

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DO TEACHERS WHO KNOW STUDENTS BETTER TEACH MORE?

by

Fernando Delgadillo

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ABSTRACT-DO TEACHERS WHO KNOW STUDENTS BETTER TEACH MORE?

A popular conception in the transfer of knowledge is that the sender must know something about the receiver. In education, effective instruction requires the teacher to know the child. But where does this knowledge come from? In a study at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, a group of 15 teachers enrolled in the graduate school listed their students and indicated which students they knew something about or knew nothing about. They then predicted which students would be the top 3 students and the bottom 3 students. At the end of the semester a second exercise was completed in which they indicated the sources of knowledge about each student. Findings indicate that when the teacher does know more about the child, such knowledge does not come from teacher inquiries made directly to the child, but instead from bureaucratic mandates which bring parents and school specialists into communication with the teacher. Furthermore, these teachers knew almost nothing about 1/3 of the 372 students involved in the study. The question, "Do Teachers Who Know Students Better Teach More?" remains largely unanswered. Students' achievement cannot be attributed to teachers' knowledge of the students if teachers do not know any more about students they perceive as good than those they perceive as poor. The grand "Deweyism" of the "child and the curriculum" which postulates integration of knowledge of the learner with knowledge of the curriculum is in no way supported by this study.

DO TEACHERS WHO KNOW STUDENTS BETTER TEACH MORE?

Schooling in urban districts facilitates students being treated *en masse*. The social structure and organization of schools promotes teacher/student anonymity with neither fully recognizing the other as individuals outside their roles. Bureaucratic demands on the teacher seriously inhibit meaningful communication with students. Testing, attendance reports, behavioral incidents, and countless out-of-class tasks take precedence over discourse between teacher and student. Whatever communication occurs that may benefit a child frequently occurs late in the semester after parent-teacher conferences have been held and after grades have been reported.

There is a popular conception that in order to transfer knowledge the sender must know something about the receiver, in other words, effective instruction requires the teacher to know the child. Indeed, the common belief is that the teacher who knows more about the student teaches more. This paper will point out that teachers and students do not talk to each other and what little communication does occur is nominal lacking the depth required to be of use in enhancing learning. When teachers do know more about particular children, such knowledge does not come from their own inquiries but from bureaucratic mandates that bring parents and school specialists into communication with classroom teachers.

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The most important source of teacher knowledge about students, other than the students themselves, are the parents. However many urban areas are characterized by a lack of parental involvement in their childrens' education. Educators maintain that good parental relations can contribute to effective education for the child, but because of varying economic and social restraints many parents are unable to be active participants.

Parent involvement is further hampered by intergenerational school failure. Parents who were themselves labeled as failures now have children experiencing similar frustrations, frequently in the same school systems. This makes these parents reluctant to revisit the schools in which only painful memories exist. In addition, some school bureaucracies use subtle and overt methods that actually discourage meaningful parental school involvement. The school is more than willing to accept parents as popcorn vendors at fund-raisers, while ignoring their needs for substantial involvement in the "meaty" issues such as teacher hiring, curriculum development, and evaluation. Also, a rude secretary or a discourteous conversation with school personnel can negatively effect the reluctant parent who is unfamiliar or inadequate in dealing with the school bureaucracies. For these reasons the dialogue between students and teachers takes on a critical dimension.

Observations of an Action Research Program offered at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, in which fifteen

practicing teachers are enrolled, provides some useful data to help clarify how and what teachers learn about their students. Findings of a study conducted in this program indicate that teachers appear to speak very little with their students. Out of 372 children/youth involved in the study, the teachers knew something about 245, while they knew nothing about the other 127 (1/3 of the student population). In examining the different ways that teachers learn about their pupils, meeting with the parents is the primary source of knowledge, even greater than speaking with the children themselves, consulting records, or speaking with other teachers.

METHOD

In March, 1990, fifteen teachers enrolled in the Graduate School at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee were asked to participate in this study. These teachers are enrolled in a Masters Program focusing on an Action Research Program that utilizes the classroom environment as the field of research. Together these teachers represent 173 years of teaching expertise. The exercise involved 372 students in their classrooms. Limitations of this study include two respondents who had pupils for less than four weeks at the time of data gathering.

Two exercises were completed. In the first exercise, teachers were asked to list all of their students' names and indicate which students they "knew something about" or "knew

nothing about" (Table 1). After completing this portion of the exercise, they were to go back and predict which of their students would be the top three students in the class and which would be the bottom three students.

At the end of the semester, they were asked to complete the second exercise. They were given a list of nine categories indicating their sources of knowledge about each student. These included:

a) Meeting with parents
b) Had the child in class before
c) Had a sibling
d) Other teachers / Formal
e) Other teachers / Informal
f) Cumulative folder
g) Specialists (Ex. Ed. Teacher, School Psychologists, etc.)
h) From the child him/her self
i) Other

The teachers were to match all of the sources of information utilized to each of their students. The results indicated how much and through what sources they knew about their students (Table 2).

HYPOTHESIS

The study proceeded with the following hypotheses:

1) If teachers know more about the pupils they teach, the pupils will do better.

2) Teachers feel they know a great deal about most of their pupils.

3) Teachers will learn more about pupils doing poorly, than about pupils doing well.

4) Teachers know and learn most about pupils from the pupils themselves.

FINDINGS

1) The respondents felt they knew a great deal about 2/3 of their students but almost nothing about 1/3 of them.

2) Whether teachers perceive youngsters to be the top 3 students in the class or the bottom 3 students in the class does not seem to influence how much they know about these students.

3) In examining the different ways that teachers learn about pupils, meeting with parents seems to be the primary source of knowledge--even greater than speaking with the children themselves.

4) In examining the sources of teachers' knowledge about pupils, the specialists in the school might be providing teachers with more information about the students predicted to be the bottom three (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

The terms personalizing education or individualizing education, incorporate teacher knowledge of the student. Engagement is an essential aspect of teaching yet teachers in this study knew nothing about one-third of their students. When they did indicate some knowledge about their students, the source of this information was more often the parent than the child.

In comparing the predicted top 3 students with the bottom 3 students there is little difference in the major sources and amount of information. What is evident is the increase in reliance of information from cumulative folders and school specialists when the students come from the population of the bottom 3 students (Table 3). Both parent

and child as the sources of knowledge about the bottom 3 students decrease slightly in comparison to the top 3 students. Teachers tend to know slightly more about those students who they perceive to be the top 3 students. Overall, teachers rely on the parent as source of information first, and student as source of information second (Table 4).

The quality and the amount of information teachers know about any of their students lacks depth and is insufficient to predict achievement or be of use in enhancing learning for individual children. Knowing information about the student is not an accurate predictor of success or failure. Specific information about individual children would be more helpful. (What interests this child has outside school, what trips has the child taken, family history, etc.)

If it were not for the intervention of school specialists which appears to trigger informal discussion with other teachers, the bottom students would perhaps go unnoticed. Teachers do respond to bureaucratic mandates as these individuals require more documentation. Twelve percent (12%) of the knowledge about the top and bottom students came from school specialists, but twice as much of this information was about the bottom students (Table 3).

SUMMARY

These data suggest that what teachers do know about students does not come primarily from the students, but more from sources outside the classroom, the most frequent being

the parent, followed by the child, then other teachers informally, finally by school specialists and cumulative folders (Table 2).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Information gathering about students is not based on intrinsic needs of the teacher but on external demands that require documentation for actions taken, the emphasis being documentation rather than education of the child. Parent visits are a mandatory part of the curriculum and teachers indicated that this is where their knowledge about the students comes from. Teachers also rely on the information of others when they recognize a child with particular needs. Teachers should seek out more quality information about all of their students regardless of their rank.

Based on the information gathered for this study it can be recommended that teachers first learn more about their students from their students. Secondly, teachers can opt to enrich that knowledge by independently interacting with the home life of the child. Finally, the focus of bureaucratic documentation needs to qualitatively incorporate the needs of the student rather than simply complying with written requirements. This directly relates to school specialists and cumulative folders which can elaborate and provide meaningful data for meaningful learning.

To be ignored can be a frustrating and debilitating experience. The 127 students involved in this study who

teachers knew nothing about were in this sense ignored. The goal of educators is not to ignore their students but to incorporate them all into the classroom process and thereby into our society.

CONCLUSION

The question which serves as the title of this article is still largely unanswered. We now know that if teachers don't know any more about students they perceive as good than they do about students they perceive as poor then they cannot be attributing students' achievement to their knowledge of the students. The grand Deweyism of the "child and the curriculum" that knowledge of the learner must be integrated with knowledge of the curriculum, is in no way supported by this study. Teacher knowledge of their students seems to be independent of their teaching practice.

Teacher/Student Knowledge

What Teachers Know About Students

15 Teachers with 372 Students

Table 1

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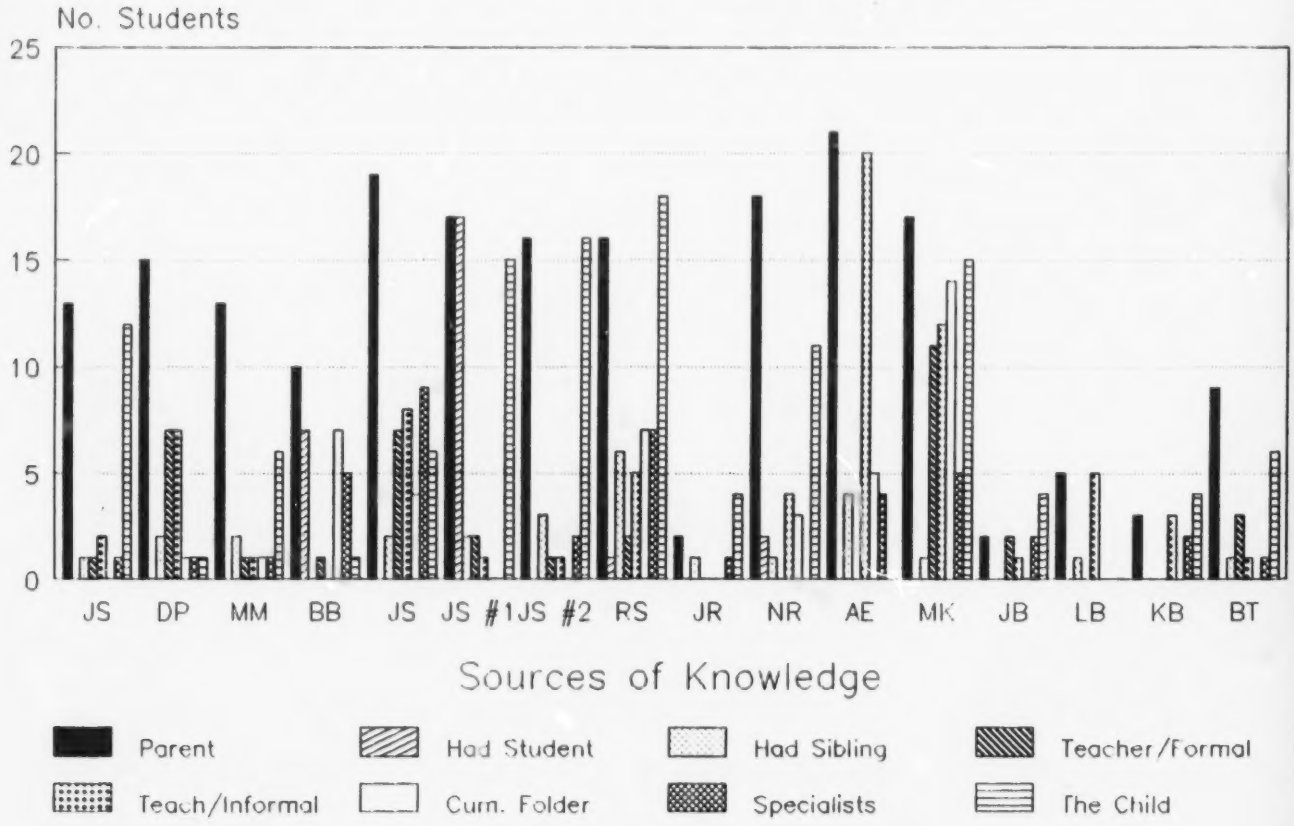
Teacher/Student Knowledge

Classroom Variations



9 responses (1%) = Other Sources

Table 2

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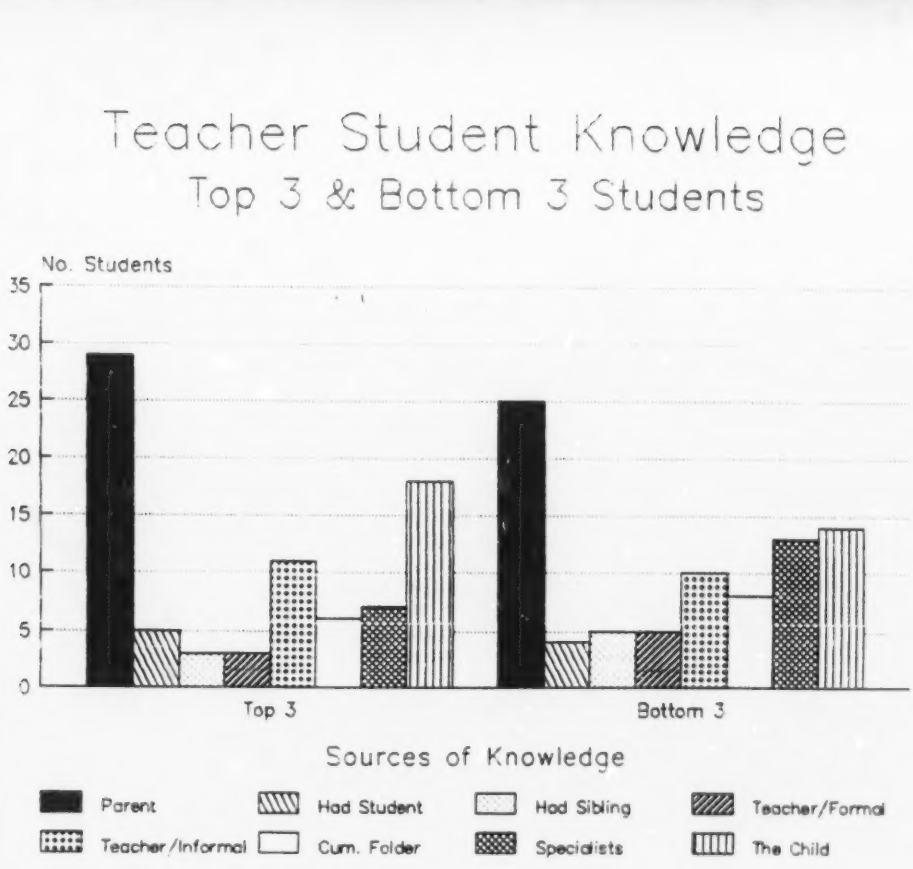
Teacher Student Knowledge
Top 3 & Bottom 3 Students
No. Students
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Top 3
Bottom 3
Sources of Knowledge
Parent
Had Student
Had Sibling
Teacher/Formal
Teacher/Informal
Cum. Folder
Specialists
The Child

Table 3

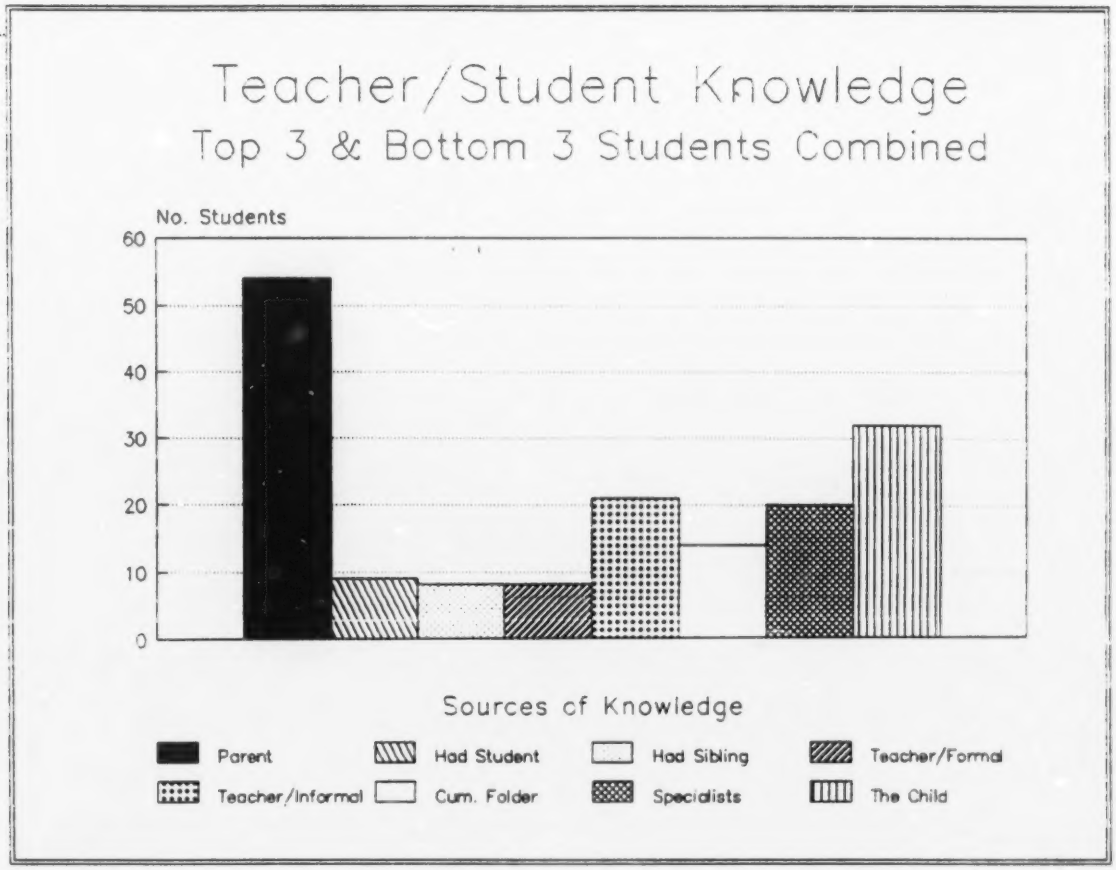

Table 4

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